

# *Skills for Bridging Accent and Language Barriers*

By Sondra Thiederman, PH.D.

[www.thiederman.com](http://www.thiederman.com)



# Understanding the Non-Native English Speaker

- Remember: The presence of a foreign accent says little about the speaker's ability to understand, read, write, and speak perfect English vocabulary and grammar. An accent is only the way the words are pronounced.
- Create an atmosphere of relaxation during the conversation – tension can make accents heavier.
- Slow the conversation down. The more time both parties have to speak slowly, interpret what has been said, and prepare a response, the better.
- Really listen to what is being said. Expect to understand and you will avoid the trap of listening to the person's accent rather than the words they are saying.
- If you have difficulty understanding an answer, rephrase the question. This allows the speaker to use different words the second time – those words may be easier to understand.
- Paraphrase back what you believe the other person has said.



# Communicating to Someone Whose English Ability is Not Fully Developed

- Organize your thoughts and words before beginning to speak.
- Speak slowly and clearly, but avoid pidgin English – this is patronizing.
- Emphasize key words while being careful not to shout.
- Avoid idioms, slang, jargon, and acronyms.
- If you are not understood the first time, repeat your message using different words – they might be more familiar to the listener.
- Use words that you hear the other person using – these are the English words that he or she understands.
- Use words that share roots in English and the other person's language. (Example: 70% of the words in Spanish and English are cognates and share the same roots).
- Avoid the word “not” – it can become lost in a sentence and create the opposite meaning than you intended.



# Communicating to Someone Whose English Ability is Not Fully Developed (continued)

- Avoid making vague statements or using vague modifiers such as “almost,” “sometimes,” and “often.”
- Avoid the passive voice.
- When possible, put your message in writing so that the listener can study it at leisure.
- Let the listener see your lips – lip reading plays a large role in good communication.
- Do not talk too much – more words are not easier to understand.
- Recap and check for understanding frequently.



# Assessing if Your Message has been Understood



George Bernard Shaw once said, *“The greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.”* The following guidelines can help you overcome the challenges of telling if your message has gotten across:

- If the person has not asked any questions, there is a good chance that he or she did not understand enough of what you said to formulate a question.
- If the listener does not interrupt, he or she may not have understood what was being said.
- Perpetual nodding and smiling is probably intended just as a courtesy and may not indicate real understanding. Intermittent nodding is a more positive sign.
- A blank expression may indicate lack of understanding although some cultures and some individuals tend to have what is known as a “low affect” or little facial expression.

# Assessing if Your Message has been Understood (continued)

- Self-conscious laughter probably indicates that the person is trying to conceal his or her embarrassment at not understanding what you have said. If there is not an obvious reason for the person to be amused, regard laughter as a probable sign of confusion.
- Statements like, “I think I understand” often mean “I do not really understand, but I don’t want to insult you by coming out and saying so.” Be alert to tentative phrases like, “I think,” “Pretty much,” or “I believe I understand.”

